ANNALI, SEZIONE ORIENTALE 77 (2017) 283–293

BRILL

ANNALI

brill.com/aioo

A 17th-Century Circassian Village in the Shape of al-Manṣūr's Baġdād

Maria Vittoria Fontana
Sapienza Università di Roma
mariavittoria.fontana@uniroma1.it

Abstract

A drawing made by the French traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier during his journey in the Levant in 1632 illustrates a round Circassian village that, in terms of its shape as well as other important devices, shows features already recognisable in the presumed plan of the 9th-century Baġdād. Although the size and functions of the two sites are so different a sort of continuity of a model can be observed, also probably under the weight of magic and religious rituals.

Keywords

Round Cities – Circassian villages – Baghdad – Jean Baptiste Tavernier – 17th-century

The 17th-Century Drawing Illustrating a Round Circassian Village

This brief paper will focus on a drawing made by the French traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1676: fig. on fol. 335) during his journey in the Levant in the first half of the 17th-century (Fig. 1). He published the drawing in the third book of his *Six Voyages*, in order to illustrate his accounts related to Chapters XI ("De la Comanie, de la Circassie, & de certains peuples que l'on appelle Kalmouches") and XII ("Des ceremonies & des coûtumes des peuples de la Comanie & de la Circassie"), the countries he visited on the occasion of his sixth and last journey in 1632, before arriving in Persia.

© KONINKLIJKE BRILL NV, LEIDEN, 2017 | DOI 10.1163/24685631-12340034

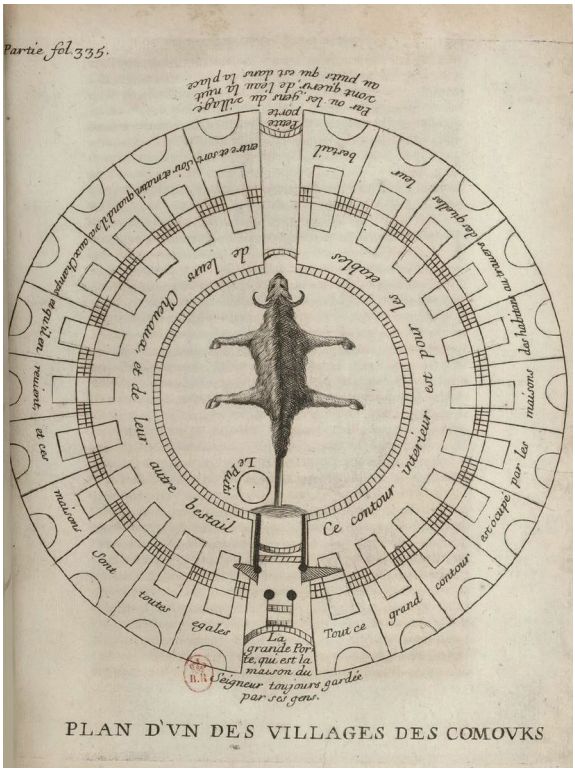

FIGURE 1 *A round Circassian village drawn in 1632 by the French traveller Jean Baptiste Tavernier (1676: fig. on fol. 335).*

The caption of this drawing reads: "Plan d'vn des villages des Comovks", but Tavernier refers to "Comovks" and, more specifically, "Cherkess [= Circassians]" describing the content of the illustration in both Chapters XI

> Ces peuples ne sont proprement ny Chrestiens ny Mahometans, [...] Ie ne parle icy que de villages, parce que dans tous ces pays dont je viens de faire la description, il n'y a ny ville ny forteresse. Ces villages, sur tout dans la Circassie sont presque tous bastis sur le mesme modele, tout en rond avec une grande place au milieu, & la figure suivante [fol. 335] en peut aisément donner l'idée au Lecteur.
>
> TAVERNIER 1676: 333–34

FIGURE 2 *A Circassian ceremony depicted in 1638 by the Dutch traveller Adam Olearius* (*1727: fig. on pp. 1083–84*).

and XII

> [...] des festes ou des ceremonies des Comouchs & des Cherques ou Circassiens [...] Voicy une autre feste qu'ils celebrent avant que de commencer à faucher les prez, & la ceremonie s'en fait en cette maniere. Tous ceux du villages qui en ont le moyen prennent chacun une chevre (car pour les ceremonies ils estiment plus les chevres que les moutons) & ceux qui sont pauvres se mettent huit ou dix ensemble, & ne prennent qu'une chevre entr'eux. Chevre, mouton ou agneau, toutes ces bestes estant assemblées chacun prend la sienne, l'égorge & en tire la peau, où ils laissent la teste & les quatre pieds. Ils étendent cette peau avec deux bâtons qui traversent d'un pied à l'autre; & la mettent à une perche plantée en terre, dont le bout d'enhaut entre dans la teste de l'animal, cõme on peut voir dans la figure suivante [fol. 335]. Autant qu'il y a des bestes tuées, autant y a-t'il de perches plantées en terre dans le milieu du village avec chacune sa peau, & chacun passant par devant fait une profonde reverence.[1]
>
> *IBID.*: 334–36

1 The same process, namely the placement of a skinned animal on a pole, is narrated in relation to a funeral ceremony by the Dutch traveller Adam Olearius who visited the same countries

Tavernier's drawing shows a round village with a double "contour", opening into two gates positioned diametrically opposite each other. Five captions placed at specific points in the drawing provide clear information on the intended use of those areas. The caption of the outer "contour", which runs all along the latter, reads: "Tout ce grand contour est occupé par les maisons des habitans au trauer des quelles leur bestail entre et sort soir et matin quand il va aux Champs et qu'il en revient, et ces maisons sont toutes egales"; the caption of the inner "contour", running all along the latter reads: "Ce contour interieur est pour les etables de leurs Chemaux, et de leur autre bestail". At the main gate we read: "La grande Porte, qui est la maison du Seigneur toujours gardée par ses gens"; and at the secondary gate: "Petite porte Par ou les gens du village vont querir de l'eau la nuit au puits qui est dans la place". The round well, set indeed in the inner circular area, just next to the inner exit of the "Seigneur"'s house, bears the short caption: "Le Puits".[2]

---

of the "Tartares Circasses" during his return from Persia. Olearius (1727: 1083–85) observed the same rituals during the journey he made only six years after Tavernier, in 1638: "Quand un homme de qualité meurt, les parens & amis s'assemblent à la campagne, tant hommes que femmes, pour sacrifier un bouc; [...] on acheve les cérémonies, on écorche le bouc, on étend la peau, & on la pend au bout d'une longue perche, devant laquelle ils font leur sacrifice; après quoi ils font bouillir & rotir la chair, dont ils font bonne chere. Le festin étant achevé, les hommes se levent, & vont les uns après les autres faire leur adoration devant la peau, & après les prieres les femmes se retirent. [...] Cette peau demeure sur la perche, jusqu'à ce que la mort d'une autre personne de qualité y en fasse mettre une autre en la place". A polo supporting a goat skin already illustrated by Tavernier is also depicted by Olearius in his figure on pp. 1083–84 (Fig. 2), but in the latter case in the setting of a funeral ceremony, thus occurring under slightly different circumstances to those described by Tavernier. Furthermore, during his stay in Circassia from 1837 to 1839 the English traveller James Stanislaus Bell (1840: II, 96–97) too observed: "We then came to a lofty pole, which was firmly planted in the ground. On the upper end was transfixed the head of a goat, whose skin stretched by sticks waved from the pole like a banner in the breeze,—close at hand were a sort of canopy formed by four poles, with a flat roof of branches and leaves thickly interwined, and a small circular inclosure of stout wicker-work".

2 In the edition of Tavernier's *Voyages* published at Amsterdam in 1679 an interesting visual perspective of this drawing is illustrated (Fig. 3). Later on the latter was also reproduced by the engraver and illustrator Pierre François Tardieu (d. 1822) in an Atlas of plates (Tardieu 1810: pl. VII).

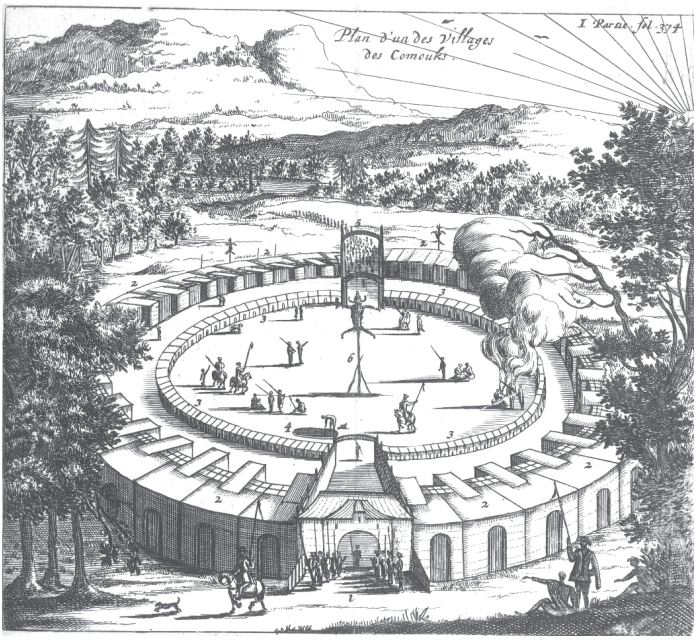

FIGURE 3 *A visual perspective of the round Circassian village* (*see Fig. 1*) *from Tavernier's edition published at Amsterdam by Johannes van Someren in 1679* (*Tavernier 1679: fig. on fol. 374*).

The Circassians and their Villages

The Circassians have a long history forged in the broad and diverse regions of their homeland including the mountains and valleys of Northwest Caucasus.[3] While the Circassian tribes of the Black Sea coast practised trade[4] but had a

3 On the history of the Circassians and on the origin of their ethnic-social groups and their economic status, see Nadyukov (2014) and Khotko (2016); on the Circassians from Caucasus employed by the Mamluk sultanate at the end of the thirteenth century (most Mamluk sultans were themselves Circassian starting from the end of the 14th century), see Massoud (2007) and cf. some notes written on this topic by the Roman traveller Pietro della Valle (1667: 323) in his twelfth letter from Cairo, in 1616; on the Circassians at the Safavid court, see Kazemzadeh (n.d.).

4 In 1502 Giorgio Interiano, a Genovese ethnographer and traveller, returning from a journey to the Orient, published his *Vita de' Zychi, chiamati Circassi* (Interianus 1502, but also Interiano 1559); cf. Crifò, Schweickard (2014) and Darinsky (1900: 179); on Zychi or Circassians see also

social structure lacking cohesion, that of the Circassian people of the inner regions was more organized.[5] "These people were warlike, and their society was highly structured to enforce a discipline and order that served them on the battlefield" (Colarusso 2002: 2).

Some information on Circassian settlements at the beginning of the 19th century was provided by members of *The Christian Observer* operating in the Caucasus who, in January 1805, maintained: "they [the Tartars] have learned from the Circassians to live in villages. Although many of the villages of the Tartars and Circassians are large, some of them containing perhaps above 5000 souls; yet they are built upon no regular plan" (Anon. 1805: 54).

Instead, the drawing made by Tavernier about two centuries before seems to disagree with the latter statement. It illustrates an interesting example of a perfectly round village characterized by a double ring, two gates positioned symmetrically opposite each other, the same number of houses on each side[6] positioned all around the outer ring and stables all around the inner ring with a well in the inner circle for the water supply. Another 19th-century account by the English traveller Edmund Spencer who spent a year (1836) in Circassia provides precise confirmation of the circular shape of Circassian villages. He stated:

> The villages and hamlets they [the Circassians] occupy are almost invariably built in the form of a circle, in the centre of which they deposit their

Khotko (2016) and referred to "Circassi" as inhabitants of the coast Chardin (1686: 96–97), travelling in 1672, also affirmed "Du canal du Palus Meotide en Mingralie, il y a six-cent milles de côtes. Ce sont toutes montagnes belles, couvertes de bois, habitées par les Circassiens. Les Turcs appellent ces peuples Cherkes. […] Ceux qui ont trafiqué le long de ces côtes, racontent mille manieres barbares de ces peuples".

5 On the social distribution of the Circassians, see Colarusso (2002: 2); Jaimoukha (2001); Natho (2009).

6 This differs to how they were described about two centuries later: "Their plan of building is to drive posts into the ground, and wattle them. Some of the roofs are covered with reeds, some with hay, some with clay, and others with black earth" (Anon. 1805: 54). The description by *The Christian Observer* continued: "The walls are plastered with clay, mixed with the dung of black cattle. Few of the Tartar and Circassian houses are more than ten or twelve feet [= 3.7 m] wide; but they make them as long as they please, and divide them into different apartments. They have no glass windows. A small hole, little more than 12 or 14 inches [= 30.48 or 35.56 cm] each way, serves to let in the light. Almost in every house there is an apartment for the women, provided they have not a distinct house of their own. […] People of property build distinct houses for strangers" (*ibidem*).

> cattle on the approach of an enemy, or to shield them during winter from the attacks of the wolves that abound in the woods.[7]
>
> SPENCER 1837: II, 223

The Round Circassian Village and its Similarity to the Presumed Plan of Baġdād

Two great scholars K.A.C. Creswell (1979: 18–22; cf. also Creswell, Allan 1989: 236) and Ugo Monneret de Villard (1968: 167–70) provided numerous examples of the origin of the round city in the ancient near and middle East well before the famous case of the 9th-century Baġdād, both taking the Assyrian military camps dating to the 9th century BCE as a starting point.[8] On the circular shape Monneret de Villard (1968: 168; cf. also his note 5) stated: "La forma circolare è sempre stata quella dell'accampamento dei nomadi, che lo costituivano con uno o più ranghi di cammelli accovacciati: probabilmente è questa l'origine del campo circolare. Tale forma è passata alle città: [...]". Furthermore, the scholar (*ibid*: 169) affirmed: "[...] Baġdād, come in questa si riproducono i due recinti di Muʿezzār".[9]

The shape of the Circassian village drawn by Tavernier and the shape of Baġdād as it was 'reconstructed' on the basis of statements from a certain number of sources (see Herzfeld in Sarre, Herzfeld 1911–20: II, 106–13; Monneret de Villard 1968: 166–71; El-Ali 1970; Lassner 1970; Creswell 1979[2]: 4–18; Creswell, Allan 1989: 229–35) at first glance appear to be very similar. Albeit on a

7 Remarkably, no information was given on the shape of the Circassian villages in the long and accurate account made by John Augustus Longworth (1840) after his year spent among the Circassians.

8 Monneret de Villard (1968: 169) actually seriously hypothesised that this tradition may have influenced the Roman "arte edificatoria", in the Provincia Arabia as well as in Germany and the Gaul (the Roman tradition may have continued giving shape to some German medieval round villages, cf. Dickinson [1953: 146]; and the German people in turn built round villages at least until the second half of the 18th century. Johann Kaspar Steube [1793: 45] referred to 30 families of Swabians that in 1779 founded the village of Charlottemberg in the region of Banat, in Romania; it is perfectly round and has a 'circle' of houses with stables behind them, four symmetrical entrances and a covered well in the middle of the village).

9 On Tell Muʿezzār see Monneret de Villard (1968: note 11 on p. 168) and, more recently, Oates (1985). See also the interesting conclusions by Sarianidi (1986: 62) on the relation between the circle (sun cult) and the altar (fire cosmology) in the 3rd–1st millennium complexes of Bactria (Afghanistan); on the 3rd-millennium round cities of Northern Syria and their inhabitants see Lyonnet (2009).

different scale, we can observe two circular rings, gates opposite one another, and houses situated all around the inner line of the outer ring.

There may have been a common motivation behind the decision to build both the Circassian villages and the Capital of the ʿAbbasids in a circular shape.[10] Once again Monneret de Villard (1968: 166) maintained that

> Un rito sarà collegato con la fondazione della città, ma sarà più un rito magico che non un rito religioso: quando fu tracciata la pianta di Baġdād, le fondazioni furono gettate nel momento propizio scelto da due astrologi, […] Anche la forma data alla Baġdād di al-Manṣūr ha rapporto con concetti astrologici: la sua forma rotonda è simbolicamente collegata con quell'idea di eternità che le fu predetta con la fondazione.[11]

Conclusions

To conclude this brief paper, although it is highly unlikely that the circular shape of the Circassian villages had anything to do with the striking suggestion Charles Wendell (1971) made with regard to the plan of Baġdād and specifically "the cross inner the circle—as another instance of the *imago mundi*", or with one of the best solutions of distributing the population of Baġdād which came from many regions of the Islamic world while still maintaining cohesion,[12] it is possible to observe a sort of continuity of a model that envisages a double ring, opposite entrances and an inhabited area encircling the town, also probably under the weight of magic and religious rituals that would need to be enhanced.

10 On other round towns built by Muslims after Baġdād see Monneret de Villard (1968: 170), Creswell (1979[2]: 21), Creswell, Allan (1989: 236).

11 On the astrological conditions that were not particularly favourable to the foundation of Baġdād and the decision made under pressure by al-Manṣūr to nonetheless initiate that politically extraordinary event, see Boudet (2015: 64–66, in part. 66).

12 The social distribution of the inhabitants of Baġdād was planned together with its circular shape, as stated by Duri (2007: 32): "The plan of Baghdad reflects social ideas. Each quarter had a person in charge, and generally had a homogeneous group, ethnically (Persians, Arabs, Khwārazmians), or by vocation". On the huge number of cities and regions its inhabitants come from, namely Kūfa, Yamāma, Fārs, Kirmān, Ḫurāsān, Ḫwārazm, Buḫārā, Marw, Balḫ, Kābul, Suġd, Isbīǧāb, Ḫuttal, Ǧurǧān, Farġāna, etc., cf. El-Ali (1970); Micheau (2008: in part. 236–37). Baġdād was also a cosmopolitan city including people of many different religious beliefs.

References

Ali (El-), Saleh Ahmad (1970) The Foundation of Baghdad, in Albert H. Hourani, Samuel M. Stern (eds.), *The Islamic City. A Colloquium*, 87–101. Oxford.

Anon. (1805) *The Christian Observer Conducted by Members of the Established Church for the Year 1805, Being the Fourth Volume*. London.

Bell, James Stanislaus (1840) *Journal of a Residence in Circassia during the Years 1837, 1838 and 1839*. London.

Boudet, Jean-Patrice (2015) From Bagdad to *Civitas Solis*: Horoscopes of Foundations of Cities, in Charles Burnett, Dorian Gieseler Greenbaum (eds.), *From Māshā'allāh to Kepler. Theory and Practice in Medieval and Renaissance Astrology*, 49–76. Ceredigion, Wales.

Chardin, Jean (1686) *Journal du Chev.r Chardin en Perse & aux Indes orientales par le Mer Noire & par la Colchide. Qui contient Le Voyage de Paris à Ispahan*. Amsterdam.

Colarusso, John (2002) *Nart Sagas from Caucasus. Myths and Legends from the Circassians, Abazas, Abkhaz, and Ubykhs*. Princeton–Oxford.

Creswell, K.A.C. (1979[2]) *Early Muslim Architecture*, II. *Early ʿAbbāssids, Umayyads of Cordoba, Aghlabids, Ṭūlūnids and Samānids, A.D. 751–905*. New York. [Repr. of Oxford 1969 edn.].

Creswell, K.A.C., James W. Allan (1989) *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture. Revised and Supplemented by James W. Allan*. Aldershot.

Crifò, Francesco, Wolfgang Schweickhard (2014) Vita et Sito de Zychi di Giorgio Interiano. Trascrizione e commento dell'editio Princeps del 1502. *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie* 130/1, 160–78.

Darinsky, A. (1900) Die Familie bei den kaukasischen Völkern. *Zeitschrift für Vergleichende Rechtswissenschaft* 4, 149–210.

Dickinson, Robert E. (1953) *Germany. A General and Regional Geography*. New York.

Duri, Abd al-Aziz (2007) Baghdad (Baghdād), in C. Edmund Bosworth (ed.), *Historic Cities of the Islamic World*, 30–47. Leiden–Boston.

Interiano, Giorgio (1559) Giorgio Interiano de la vita, de Zychi, chiamati i Ciarcassi, in Gian Battista Ramusio, *Secondo Volume delle Navigationi et Viaggi nel qvale si contengono l'Historia delle cose de Tartari, & diuersi fatti de loro Imperatori, descritta da M. Marco Polo Gentilhuomo Venetiano, & da Hayton Armeno*, 140–41. Venetia.

Interianus, Georgius (1502) *La Vita et Sito de' Zychi, chiamati Circassi, Historia Notabile*. Venetiis (Aldus Manutius).

Jaimoukha, Amjad (2001) *The Circassians: A Handbook* (Caucasus World. Peoples of the Caucasus & the Black Sea 6). Richmond.

Kazemzadeh, Hamed (n.d.) "Caucasian (Georgian–Circassian) people at the Safavid Court" According to Persian Sources (16th & 17th Century) https://www.academia

.edu/9759872/Caucasian_Georgian_Circassian_people_at_the_Safavid_court_-_According_to_Persian_sources_16th_and_17th_century_ (16-10-2016).

Khotko, Samir K. (2016) Circassian Principalities in the XIV–XV Centuries: Formation and Interrelation with Sub-ethnic Groups. *Istoričeskaja i Sociol'no-obrazovatel'naja Mysl* 8/2–1, 46–58 [in English and Russian].

Lassner, Jacob (1970) *The Topography of Baghdad in the Early Middle Ages. Text and Studies*. Detroit.

Longworth, John Augustus (1840) *A Year among the Circassians*. London.

Lyonnet, Bertille (2009) Who lived in the Third-millennium "Round Cities" of Northern Syria? in Jeffrey Szuchman (ed.), *Nomads, Tribes, and State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives* (Oriental Institute Seminars 5), 179–200. Chicago.

Massoud, Sami G. (2007) *The Chronicles and Annalistic Sources of the Early Mamluk Circassian Period* (Islamic History and Civilization 67). Leiden–Boston.

Micheau, Françoise (2008) Baghdad in the Abbasid Era: A Cosmopolitan and Multi-Confessional Capital, in Salma Kadhra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Attilio Petruccioli, André Raymond (eds.), *The City in the Islamic World*, 221–45. Leiden–Boston.

Monneret de Villard, Ugo (1968) *Introduzione allo studio dell'archeologia islamica: le origini e il periodo omayyade*. Firenze.

Nadyukov, S.A. (2014) Ethno-social and Economic Character of Circassia at the Border of the 15–16th Centuries. *Vestnik Adygejskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* 135/1, 61–65 [In Russian, English abstract].

Natho, Kadir I. (2009) *Circassian History*. n. l. [USA].

Oates, David (1985) Walled Cities in Northern Mesopotamia in the Mari Period. *MARI, Annales des Recherches Interdisciplinaires* 4, 585–94.

Olearius, Adam (1727) *Voyages du S.r Adam Olearius, considerablement augmentez en cette dernière edition, et divisez en deux parties. Voyages Très-curieux & très-renommez faits en Moscovie, Tartarie et Perse, Par le S.r Adam Olearius, dans lesquels on trouve une Description curieuse & la Situation exacte des Pays et Etats, par où il a passé, tels qui sont la Livonie, la Moscovie, la Tartarie, la Medie, & la Perse, Traduits de l'Original & augmentez par le Sr. De Wicquefort, Divisez en deux Parties*, Tome premier. Amsterdam.

Sarianidi, Viktor Ivanovič (1986) *Die Kunst des alten Afghanistan. Architektur, Keramik, Siegel, Kunstwerke aus Stein und Metall*. Leipzig.

Sarre, Ernst, Friedrich Herzfeld (1911–20) *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet*, 4 vols. Berlin.

Spencer, Edmund (1837) *Travels in Circassia, Krim Tartary,* &C. *Including a Steam Voyage down the Danube, from Vienna to Constantinople and round the Black Sea, in 1836*, 2 vols. London.

Steube, Johann Kaspar (1793) *Briefe über das Banat* 1. Eisenach.

Tardieu, Jean Baptiste Pierre (1810) *Atlas des voyages de Tavernier, contenant La Carte d'Asie et vingt-trois Planches, gravées par Tardieu, aîné* (Bibliothèque portative des voyages XLIX). Paris.

Tavernier, Jean Baptiste (1676) *Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Ecuyer Baron d'Aubonne, qu'il a fait en Turquie, en Perse, et aux Indes, Pendant l'espace de quarante ans, & par toutes les routes que l'on peut tenir; accompagnez d'observations particulières sur la qualité, la religion, le gouvernement, les coûtumes & le commerce de chaque païs; avec les figures, le poids, & la valeur des monnaies qui y ont cours*. Première Partie, *Où il n'est parlé que de la Turquie & de la Perse*. Paris.

Tavernier, Jean Baptiste (1679) *Les six voyages de Jean Baptiste Tavernier, Ecuyer Baron d'Aubonne, en Turquie, en Perse et aux Indes, Pendant l'espace de quarante ans, & par toutes les routes que l'on peut tenir: accompagnez d'observations particuliers sur la qualité, la religion, le gouvernement, les coûtumes & le commerce de chaque païs, avec les figures, le poids, & la valeur des monnoyes qui y ont cours*. Premiere Partie, *Où il n'est parlé que de la Turquie & de la Perse*. Amsterdam.

Valle (della), Pietro (1667) *Viaggi di Pietro della Valle il Pellegrino, con minuto ragguaglio di tutte le cose notabili osseruate in essi, Descritti da lui medesimo in 54. Lettere familiari, Da diuersi luoghi della intrapresa pellegrinatione. Mandate in Napoli All'erudito, e fra' più cari, di molti anni suo Amico, Mario Schipano. Diuisi in trè Parti. Cioè, la Tvrchia, la Persia et l'India, Co'l ritorno in Patria, Et in quest'vltima Impressione, aggiuntaui la Vita dell'Autore*. Venetia.

Wendell, Charles (1971) Baghdâd: *Imago Mundi*, and Other Foundation-Lore. *International Journal of Middles East Studies* 2/2, 99–128.